
Comus

Personnel:

Glen Goring - guitar, vocals
Colin Pearson - violin
Bobbie Watson - vocals, percussion
Roger Wootton - guitar, vocals
Rob Young - percussion, oboe, flute
Lindsay Cooper
Andy Hellaby - bass
Philip Barry - percussion
Gordon Caxon - drums
Didier Malherbe - sax
Keith Hale - keyboards
Tim Kraemer - cello

Albums:

1. "First Utterance" (Dawn DNLS 3019) 1971
 2. "To Keep from Crying" (Virgin V 2018) 1974
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If you dig: Prog Folk, Acid Folk, Canterbury, Truly twisted ideas



Comus, which was named after a poem¹⁸ by the 17th century poet John Milton, was a British Progressive Folk Rock band, perhaps too progressive. Despite drawing inspiration from bands such as **King Crimson** and **Pentangle**, their first and truly one of a kind album can only

18. Which was respectively named after a Greek god.

be regarded as Rock music by association.

The roots of the band go deep to the Ravensbourne arts college in Bromley, Kent, when the 17 year olds Goring and Wooton, who began in 1967 playing in Folk clubs acoustic covers to **Velvet Underground** songs, were joined by the violinist Pearson. When the three heard Bobbie Watson, the 16 year old girlfriend of one of the musicians they used to jam with, sing, they invited her to join the group. **Comus** used to perform a lot at the Beckenham Arts Club and they even performed alongside **David Bowie** in front of 3000 people on a free music festival in 1969. In fact, **Bowie** was a huge fan of theirs and the band was even slotted to become his permanent opening act, but one outstanding performance by them which blew **Bowie** off the stage convinced him it would be wise to pass on the outshining **Comus** and they ended up warming up **Love** instead.

RCA signed them on a contract after hearing only 3 tracks demo which was sent to them, but the contract was annulled for personal differences between the RCA employed band manager and the management of the record company after the band recorded only a few tracks. Some of the RCA recordings found their way in 1970 into a Lindsay Shonteff soft porn flick named "Permissive", where the band members even served as extras, appearing as totally stoned people in the background of one of the scenes. They would go on and score music for another Shonteff movie down the road - "Big Zapper" from 1971.

Two additional musicians joined the band in the meanwhile: Young and Hellaby. After several further live gigs the band signed a contract with Dawn and recorded its debut, which was released in February 71.

The starting point might be British Folk, but the music of "First Utterance" creeps and crawls, interlaces beautiful melodies, magnificent sadistic singing that only the psychotic playing can be equaled to and cruel disturbing lyrics. This must be the music playing inside the head of a Pagan schizo while he was torturing his victims in the deep of the British woods of medieval times. Rape, Brutal murder ("Drip Drip"), witchcraft and madness ("The Prisoner") are the themes occupying **Comus**, as Milton's poem serves as a framing device. Even the most sincere attempt to describe this music would be a terrible injustice to it. "First utterance" is an acquired taste and it would be extremely difficult to sit and listen through it all without feeling a slight tingling of discomfort, but eventually it will pay off as this is one of the very few Folk albums which truly creates a new and unique atmosphere. A genuine classic which should not be missed!



Surprisingly (or not), the reviews were horrible. Meager support from the record company led to a mere 7000 copies sold. Despite the burning commercial failure of the debut, the next project by the band was even more ambitious: an album comprising two 15-20 minutes tracks each which was supposed to be titled "The Malgaard Suite", but this sort of thing meant literally economic suicide: the crowd was not into these sorts of things any more in 1972 and the band just gave it all up entirely. In 1973, several of the now split band members recorded music for the soundtrack of yet another Shonteff movie - "Zapper's Blade of Vengeance".

If the story of the band would have ended here, then surely it would have been a tragedy and everyone could do nothing but wonder what this group could have done had they have a real chance. Unfortunately perhaps, **Comus** themselves answered that question when they got another shot from the Virgin record company and released a second album in 1974.

Compared to "First Utterance", the new album cannot but disappoint

“This must be the music playing inside the head of a Pagan schizo while he was torturing his victims in the deep of the British woods of medieval times.”



(Pearson and Young left in August 71 and were replaced with Lindsay Cooper; Goring was unavailable) plus guests and featured fairly similar elements. The transition to the big label Virgin, this after Dawn refused to extend their contract, may have also not been in the band’s favor.

“To Keep from Crying” is a much more conventional album, almost commercial in the bad meaning of the word. In spite of all that, there are lovely moments here as well, such as the opener “Down (Like a Movie Star)” and “After the Dream”. Though the album got the go-ahead, it received absolutely no support from the record company again and sold even less than its predecessor. This was the end of the band.

It’s not hard to see why **Comus** didn’t make it in their time. The music is far too hard to digest in almost every aspect of it and couldn’t have gained wide audience regardless of when it would have been released. It’s a shame, since “First Utterance” is truly a one-time work of twisted beauty. An original copy of their first album will cost you today around \$700.

In the post mortem of the band, its members wrote music for another Shonteff movie - “Spy Story” from 1975. Glen Goring moved to Norfolk, there he began working as a restorator and also painted and sculpted.

Since the Eighties he has been writing and among others he wrote for the theatre, the radio, to the big screen and even published a book. Cooper joined **Henry Cow** while Roger Wootton designed album covers until the Eighties, then he changed his last name to Raven and moved to Sweden, though today he is living in England again. **Comus** reunited for a one show only for the Melloboat festival, which was held on a boat in 2008 in Sweden. A DVD and an album of that show is available. More shows eventually followed and 2012 saw the release of a new album called "Out of the Coma" which contains 3 new songs and an old live recording of the first part of "The Malgaard Suite".

Brought here is the exclusive interview I did with Roger Wootton for the book:

—● Who/what influenced you musically? And not less important, what were your influences lyrically?

It is difficult to be specific. It just came from inside me. I grew up in the country and was naturally drawn to acoustic guitar rather than electric. My early influences were **John Renbourn**, **Bert Jansch**, **The Incredible String Band** and perhaps **Bob Dylan**; although I was very interested in avant garde jazz (**John Coltrane**, **Archie Shepp**, **Ornette Coleman**) I was reacting against a repressive childhood and the restrictive society of the time. The intensity of the violent imagery was an archetype which just sort of took over me.

—● What were your shows like? What was the crowd reaction?

The gigs were often better than the "First Utterance" album and the band really took off live. We had a strong following at first and as the music fashions changed in late 1971, we began to find a small gathering at the front who were really into it and the rest of the audience behind not paying much attention.

—● Is there any particularly memorable or favorite gigs?

The most memorable gigs were The Purcell Room, London, with **David Bowie** shortly after he had had the hit with "Space Oddity"; The famous Weeley Festival, some of the university gigs. The best venue we ever

played, in my opinion, was the Colston Hall Bristol. European tours are like a blur now and I only remember moments.

—● You signed a recording contract with RCA, but then it was cancelled. Why?

Chris Youle, our manager, worked for RCA at the time and so got us the contract. We had already recorded one song and then the management at RCA decided we were unsuitable for the label. Chris Youle quit RCA and we got interest from Pye.

—● A few of your songs were featured in the movie “Permissive” by Lindsay Shonteff, where you also had a brief appearance. Please tell me on how this came to be.

Along with **Mungo Jerry** and other bands we auditioned for the film. The director was particularly impressed with **Comus**, and to add to the effect, during the audition I accidentally cut my finger on a guitar string and blood spurted everywhere, but we carried on playing as if nothing had happened. I think this was a dramatic enhancement to the performance and Shonteff was interested. The recordings were adaptations of the **Comus** material on “First Utterance”.

—● Your music as a band was also featured in another Shonteff’s movie. Was this music previously released or did you write it specifically for the movie?

In 1971 we did “Big Zapper”. This was with the original **Comus** line-up. The music was written specially for the film and sounded like **Comus**. There are no other recordings of it apart from the soundtrack. “Zapper’s Blade of Vengeance” and “Spy Story” were made after **Comus** had split up in 1972 and were written by two or more members respectively.

—● Was “First Utterance” first conceived as a concept album or did it evolve naturally into some sort of one?

It seemed to just develop naturally. I got into a zone and the songs followed successively from 1969 to 1970. There was no deliberate concept but it seemed to become one.

—● Who created the cover art to First Utterance and what was the concept behind the drawing?

I drew the outside cover and Glenn painted the inside. We were at

art college together. It was a kind of primal scream reaction to the oppressions I had experienced all my life. More than that I cannot say. The Character on the cover is meant to be Comus - the character from the masque by John Milton, after which the band was named. This is Comus, himself, from the dark underworld. I have done a lot of new art work for **Comus** using the same character and the same medium - black pen. There is a new live DVD, shortly to be made available from our website featuring my latest drawing.

—● Most of the album's reviews weren't favorable and Dawn wasn't really pushing it forward. How did it affect the band?

We were desperately disappointed and we would get letters from fans, saying they could not find the album anywhere. I would say that this knockback was the biggest problem we had to face and eventually it led to Rob Young quitting, which was the beginning of the end.

—● What can you tell me about "The Malgaard Suite"? Were any demos made?

"The Malgaard suite" was a very ambitious work with two main pieces, each lasting about 20 minutes. Rob had gone and the best replacement we could find was Lindsay Cooper, who played bassoon and flute and did not play percussion. This led us further into a sort of Lord of the Rings inspired semi - classical suite concept. It did not go down well



"First Utterance"

with audiences, since, at the time glam rock and pop were fashionable and we were going against the grain. I have heard a very poor quality recording made at a gig and frankly, it does sound over indulgent. I think we had bitten off more than we could chew and one would need classical training and lessons in construction to pull it off. I am now composing orchestrated songs of my own and could probably handle a project on this scale.

—● What led to the break up of 1972?

The great irony is that **David Bowie**, who gave us our first break with the residency at the Beckenham Arts Lab and our first major gig, supporting him at the Purcell Room, in the end became our nemesis. From late 1971 into 1972, glam rock appeared. This brought show biz values back into vogue and our audiences began to dwindle. This happened to most of the acoustic acts, from **The Pentangle** to **The Incredible String Band** and one by one they all folded. Gradually we got fewer and fewer gigs and then Chris Youle got a job with the Robert Stigwood Organization and resigned as manager. The writing was on the wall and we were obliged to split up.

—● Why did Virgin approach you to record another album after the band has already folded?

They wanted us to reform. I tried to get the other original members but only Bobbie and Andy were available. The songs were not intended for **Comus**. Things went badly but we felt, well, we can't afford to turn down the opportunity of making another album - in hindsight a mistake.

—● So the songs on the second album were not intended for Comus? Who were they intended for then?

My solo career - I was drawn into pop, which, for me was a mistake. Keith Hale, the keyboard player on the "To keep from Crying" album, stole one of my songs and published it in his name. The song was "It's a Mystery", which was a number one hit for Toyah. Am I forever mad about that! I didn't have enough evidence to take it to court.

—● Did the record company have any influence over the "To Keep from Crying"?

No, we needed a producer but Virgin wouldn't give us one. I think the less said about the second album, the better. I am now writing new

songs for **Comus** right back in the same vein as “First Utterance”. We will be rehearsing a new one called Out of the Coma next weekend.

—● Can you share an interesting or a funny story from the old days?

Life with **Comus** was not a lot of fun. We all got on pretty well and I can’t remember any serious rows. It was a pretty wretched and underpaid experience.

—● And finally, after you did Melloboat festival last year and setting up a website, what does the future hold for Comus?

As I have mentioned, we are concentrating on new material as a real follow-up to “First Utterance”. We are finding it hard in the current recession to get gigs. We do have an east coast US tour being booked – New York, Philadelphia etc. and a couple of festivals in the summer. We are releasing a DVD of the Melloboat concert. I would say the intention is to pick up the pieces from 1971 and carry on.

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